

MALDIVES

MANTAS GALORE
ON A LIVEBOARD
PHOTO WORKSHOP

TESTED

10 DIVE BAGS
ARE RATED
AND REVIEWED

SCOTLAND

ASTOUNDING DIVES
ON THE WRECKS IN
THE SOUND OF MULL



JULY 2011
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Manta madness



Tony Baskeyfield was keen to capture the perfect shot of a manta ray, so he joined an Alex Mustard liveaboard trip in the Maldives to complete his mission

Photographs by **TONY BASKEYFIELD**

The Maldives is renowned as a diving destination, particularly if you want to see the big pelagics such as manta rays and whalesharks. Rather than take my chances on hitting the best spots, I chose to join digital photography supremo Alex Mustard's photography group onboard the liveaboard Monsoon in the wet season in August. Although at this time of the year the water visibility isn't so good, it would be peak manta season in Hanifaru. This would be the highlight of our trip if we had calculated the plankton and tides correctly. Hopefully some encounters with a large aggregation of mantas awaited... If I wanted to get a good shot of a manta, Alex would be the man to put me in the right spot at

the right time. There were 16 guests, including photographers from Serbia and Norway. Even Red Bull extreme photographer Predrag Vuckovic was there.

After an eight-hour flight from Gatwick we took a seaplane from Male and flew 85 miles north to Kuredo, the largest island in the Maldives, landing right beside our liveaboard Monsoon. She was to be our home for the next week.

Monsoon operates in the northern atolls 80 nautical miles north of Male. Chris Trickey, our chief dive guide and boat manager, has hunted out all the best dive sites in this unexplored region of the Maldives, including the now-famous Hanifaru lagoon. He has plenty more unexplored sites that he is keeping under his hat for the time being and

intends to open up to divers on Monsoon.

Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll was the hot spot our group of photographers was really looking forward to. This small bay, about the size of a football field and with a maximum 10-12m depth, is home to a very unique seasonal phenomenon. The plankton trapped in the bay attracts feeding mantas by the hundreds. As you can imagine, we were all very excited to get in the water. We were not disappointed; I saw one manta skimming along the seabed coming out of the plankton-fogged water. More drifted into the bay like aircraft - some high in the water, some coming in groups. Without warning one would turn, loop and bank, twisting, gulping and sending the fusiliers into a desperate frenzy. I was right in the middle of the



The 'twirl' technique adds
an unusual effect



melee being bumped from every direction. Mantas are not aggressive, but when feeding is on their mind all sense is lost. To us it may be 'manta madness', but to the mantas it is simply lunch. There is some concern about the area. Despite being recently discovered, Hanifaru and its mantas may already be under threat from tourists and dive boats. This could be eco-tourism gone slightly wrong, but I'd rather the mantas be crowded by tourists than fished to extinction. The Maldivian government has recently pledged to protect the mantas by introducing guidelines for divers and snorkelers. It is good to see a government committed to preserving the natural environment



Tony with camera (shot by Preddrag Vuckovik)

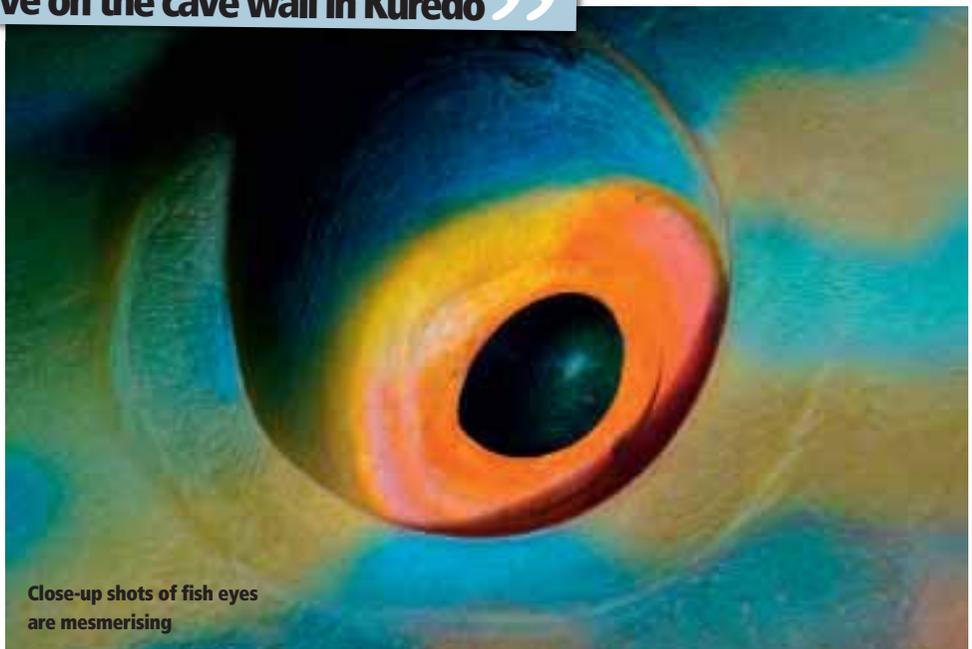
“ Our last dive on the trip blew me away, finishing off with a beautiful turtle dive on the cave wall in Kuredo ”

for its inhabitants and ensuring the survival of the area.

I came to the Maldives primarily to photograph mantas and was unsure what else there was to capture with my camera. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the diving in every location is world class. At most locations there were soft corals and huge orange fan corals covered with crinoids, all surrounded by glassfish and multiple kinds of creatures buzzing all over the reefs. The water was a turquoise-blue, with reduced visibility due to seasonal plankton blooms. I also enjoyed macro dives with clownfish and porcelain crabs. Dhigu Tilla is a wonderful drift dive with soft draping corals and overhangs. The northernmost point in our itinerary in the remote Noonu Atoll, and Mendhoo Reef offers up a great afternoon and night dive, with turtles, clouds of masked bannerfish and masses of anemones.

The mantas only venture into Hanifaru Bay during high tide every 12 hours. Between tides we dived other areas where the water was a lot clearer. Every day the format was the same onboard MV Monsoon. We had the first briefing at around 8am, then kitted up at the back of the boat. It was then into the zodiacs to be ferried out to the dive site, with the rides usually lasting five to ten minutes. Dive guide Chris Trickey first checked to see that we were exactly in position to commence our dive. Then it was a backward roll into the lovely warm water. I wore a shortie suit for the whole week and never felt cold, even on dives of around 60 minutes. Diving up to three times a day, most guests logged a total of 17 dives in the seven days onboard Monsoon.

Baa, Raa and Noonu Atolls are infrequently visited by most Maldivian liveboards, which means we had a unique opportunity to explore some of the finest reefs with no other liveboards on the horizon. Stretching northwest from Lhaviyani



Close-up shots of fish eyes are mesmerising

Atoll, these three atolls were on our diving itinerary and they gave us some of the most-unspoiled diving in the world. Our last dive on the trip blew me away, finishing off with a beautiful turtle dive on the cave wall in Kuredo. The water here was clear and very blue, with 30 metre visibility - the best we'd had all week. I have travelled to Raine Island, Australia to witness turtles laying their eggs, but this was one of the best turtle dives I have ever done. All of the turtles had immaculate outer shells. In this area, the green turtles scratch on the shallow overhangs of the caves to remove any parasites and growths off their shells to reveal their beautiful natural colours. This is Grand Turtle Airport Central, with green turtles flying everywhere in crystal-clear blue water surrounded by shoals of fusiliers. On every dive on this trip there were sightings of manta rays. Some of these encounters lasted the

Turtle shells have beautiful markings





“ This small bay, about the size of a football field and with a maximum 10-12m depth, is home to a very unique seasonal phenomenon ”

The mantas fly in formation as they feed



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

The Maldives



Male

How to get there

The capital city Male, the hub for international flights, is reached from London and other major cities of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. From there, you can either get on a liveaboard immediately, or travel by seaplane to meet your boat further into the archipelago.

When to go

All year, with the calmest, driest conditions from December through April. The southwest monsoon season is from May to November, with generally less rain and less-calm conditions, but it is the best time to see mantas and whalesharks.

“The mantas only come into Hanifaru Bay during high tide every 12 hours”

Entry requirements

A valid passport with six months before expiry.

Currency

Maldivian Rufiyaa (£1 = MVR19.77)

Where to eat

The Monsoon's chef serves up a delicious spread of Maldivian and Western food.

Where to meet

Relaxing on the sundeck of the Monsoon with a cool beer is hard to beat.

SPORT DIVER VERDICT

The Maldives is undoubtedly one of the best locations to see manta rays, but it also has some beautiful reefs, a plethora of fish species and great visibility

Seaplanes give you a great view of the Maldives



TRAVEL FACT BOX: THE MALDIVES

The Maldives is famous for its atolls and islands, which barely rise above sea level, with white sandy beaches and all-year-round sunshine. The islands of the Maldives are the visible coral atolls of an ancient oceanic volcanic mountain range, the outer edge of which plunges to depths of more than 3,000m at certain points.

In fact, 'atoll' is a Maldivian word and its origins come from the Dhivehi word 'atholhu'. Situated in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives archipelago stretches some 600 miles and consists of 26 natural atolls and 1,109 islands.

The Maldives is located at the equator and experiences monsoonal climate. There are two distinct seasons when diving in the Maldives.

The wet season has water visibility of ten to 20 metres and brings heavy rains, strong winds and occasional thunderstorms. The southwest monsoon runs from May to November, with December being the changeover to the northeast monsoon.

The dry season, with the northeast monsoon from January to March, brings bluer, clearer water, strong currents and water visibility in excess of 50 metres. This monsoon gives the north and mid atolls clear skies, sunshine and calm seas for most of the period. However, the southern atolls have most of their rainfall and rough seas during the early stages of the northeast monsoon, but it gets calmer and hot, dry periods prevail until the arrival of the next monsoon.

All year round the water temperature is 28-29 degrees C and daily temperatures range from around 31 degrees C during the day to 23 degrees C at night.

whole dive, with up to four mantas circling over us on a manta cleaning station. The Maldives has the biggest concentration of reef mantas in the world, with an estimated 8,000 mantas and 300 whalesharks. This has to be the greatest area on the planet if you want to dive with a manta.

Tony booked his Alex Mustard photographic workshop on the Monsoon liveaboard to Hanifaru with specialist tour operator Scuba Travel (www.scubatravel.com)

Other tour operators offering the Maldives

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|-------------------|--|
| Albatros Top Boat | www.albatrostopboat.com |
| Blue o Two | www.blueotwo.com |
| Divequest | www.divequest.co.uk |
| Dive Worldwide | www.diveworldwide.com |
| Equator Diving | www.equatordiving.com |
| Geo Dive | www.geodive.com |
| Regaldiv | www.regal-diving.co.uk |
| Sportif | www.sportifdive.co.uk |
| Tropical Sky | www.holidays4scubadiving.co.uk |
| Werner Lau | www.wernerlau.com |

Manta ray

